

Queer Girlhoods in Contemporary Comics

Disrupting Normative Notions

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Abstract: In this article, I look at how comics aimed at young readers can serve to disrupt normative notions, gendered binaries, and fixed designations through featuring, or focusing on, queer girlhoods. In doing so I consider two contemporary series, *Ms. Marvel* and *Lumberjanes*. I contextualize these titles against aspects of the publishing of comics, before analyzing some of the narratives and characters in the texts in relation to queer girlhoods. I conclude that the comics offer different approaches and, therefore, differentiated reading experiences for the young readers who engage with them, but that they also form part of a wider grouping of titles that offer diverse images of young people embracing affiliations going beyond family and nation.

Keywords: activism, graphic novels, intersectionality, *Lumberjanes*, *Ms. Marvel*, narrative texture, Wonder Woman



Introduction

“What in the Joan Jett are you Doing?!” (Stevenson et al. 2016: 3)

In focusing on the representations of queer girlhoods in contemporary fictional graphic novels for young readers, I look at two ongoing series, *Lumberjanes* (2015–present) by Shannon Watters, Noelle Stevenson, and others, and *Ms. Marvel* (2014–present) whose creative team is led by G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona, with Sana Amanat as editor.¹ As with *Lumberjanes*, there are a number of contributors. I chose these series because they are among the most popular titles of the mid-2010s and can be seen as key representatives of a move towards diversity in titles targeting girl readers, although their audiences include other readers too. I chose them also because the creative teams illustrate increasing diversity among comic-makers.

Central to both series is the disruption of normative notions, traditionally constructed relationships, gender binaries, and fixed designations. In



effect, they subvert and complicate the normative girl (Kearney 2011; Projansky 2014) and I explore here how and to what degree they position queer girlhoods as central. Comics are well suited to complicate girlhood because, as Hillary L. Chute argues, they “can perform the enabling political and aesthetic work of bearing witness powerfully because of [their] rich narrative texture” (2010: 4). It can also be argued that comics are able to present a queer space in which cohesive and diverse groups exist that are not dominated by representations of white, affluent, able-bodied, Western heteronormative girlhood. In this, the titles pick up on and respond to other texts, through both art and narratives, that have pointed the way to the development of queer girlhood-centered comics.

Trina Robbins (1999) reminds us that in the US comics intended for female readership have historically been focused on heterosexual romance. However, the contemporary comic creators under discussion were not engaged, as young readers, with comics aimed primarily at girls. For example, Wilson first encountered comics as a child via the *X-Men* and also watched cartoons about that team (Tolentino 2017) and, as a teenager, bought, among other Vertigo titles, Peter Milligan’s *Shade, The Changing Man* (1990–1996). Her involvement with the superhero genre and her awareness of how female characters have been depicted within it means that her work can be seen as a direct intervention into this history of representation. In addition, Vertigo, although an imprint of DC comics, was both founded by a woman, Karen Berger, and published works dealing with a number of genres, often incorporating a thread of social commentary and mature content. In effect, this imprint offered a diverse set of texts and characters that proved inspirational.

Similarly, Stevenson and Watters engaged with a range of comics as young readers. Stevenson said in an interview with Juliet Kahn, for instance, that

social media has played a really big part in me just getting into comics in the first place. Social media is how I found which [books] would be welcoming to me as a young woman in comics, so that’s how I found out about Matt Fraction’s *Hawkeye*, that’s how I found out about *Saga*, *Rat Queens*, all those titles. (2014: n.p.)

Here Stevenson is citing comics that appeal to a wide range of audiences rather than focusing on titles aimed explicitly at girls. In the same interview Watters said, “When I came to Boom, my taste was not superhero comics; I didn’t like the average direct market draw, you know? . . . my deal was indie comics and webcomics” (n.p.). To summarize, what drew these creators into working with comics included the attraction of their capacity to represent diverse voices and depict characters who were outsiders struggling with the

vulnerabilities that such an identity can bring, and also the possibility of offering a response to titles targeting a white male audience. All of this points to the potential of comics as a space for depicting queer girlhoods and to how mainstream comics can be read and responded to in ways that subvert some of their content.

Historically, some characters, like Wonder Woman, have lent themselves to queer interpretations. However, critics of comics and their content recognized this, too, and, like Fredric Wertham, for instance, offered very critical readings of this queer potential. Wertham described Wonder Woman as

always a horror type. She is physically very powerful, tortures men, has her own female following, is the cruel, 'phallic' woman. While she is a frightening figure for boys, she is an undesirable ideal for girls, being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to want to be. (1954: 35)

He further argued that “[i]f it were possible to translate a cardboard figure like ‘Wonder Woman’ into life, every normal-minded young man would know there is something wrong with her” (235). Here he locates himself and the “normal-minded” young man as right-minded citizens against women (or girls) positioned as deviant, a category that includes those in the audience who might admire the character. His assumptions about the comic’s contents, particularly regarding lesbianism, female community, assertiveness, and power is additionally linked with his conception of young readers being influenced directly by what they read. Consequently, in line with this approach based on a media-effects theory, he stated that this comic was one “which we have found to be one of the most harmful” (64).

The moral panic about comics in the US and elsewhere in the 1950s and onwards, as shown in John A. Lent’s (1999) collection, can be interpreted as being about adults’ fears of a loss of control over young people, especially fears regarding boys, juvenile delinquency, and sexuality. Wertham’s reading, for instance, of Batman’s relationship with sidekick, Robin, stated that it would “stimulate children to homosexual fantasies” (1954: 189). However, it can also be read as adults attempting to maintain and control cultural constructions of girlhood (Gibson 2015). Girlhood, and by extension, actual girls, are perceived by adults to be at risk through engagement with narratives deemed problematic, whether in relation to sexual behavior and criminal activity, or even in simply connecting with popular culture. Given the impact of the historical anti-comic campaigns, combined with constructions of childhood as innocent, titles created today for younger readers are often closely scrutinized in relation to their assumed impact upon the reader. This makes the representation of queer girlhoods, and the pop-

ularity of the chosen titles significant since it represents a shift away from perceptions about comics based on media-effects theory.

These contemporary titles from different creative contexts have much in common, including the disruption of norms about girlhood. *Lumberjanes* is published by the Boom! Box imprint which publishes experimental, creator-driven work by writers and artists from outside the mainstream comics industry. Such titles generally represent a different production ethos to that typically produced by the Big Two superhero comic publishers, DC Comics and Marvel. All the same, the supposedly mainstream Marvel comic, *Ms. Marvel*, incorporates girlhood along with a number of social justice themes and it has a commitment to diversity.

Ms. Marvel, it can be argued, follows in the tradition of earlier Marvel titles. As Ramzi Fawaz (2016) observes, some postwar superhero comics focused on potential progressive social transformation via a “mutant generation” embracing “the production of implicitly queer and nonnormative affiliations that exceeded the bounds of traditional social arrangements such as the nuclear family and the national community.” These teams or families, Fawaz argues, “sought to use their powers for shaping a more egalitarian and democratic world” (2016: 11). The affiliations in *Ms. Marvel*, where friendship, teamwork and cross-generational links with older superheroes and skilled but non-powered friends who take similar ethical approaches, reflect this approach to superhero storytelling.

Despite this history of engagement with diversity and social justice, recent comics have been criticized for taking similar approaches. For example, in 2016, David Gabriel, a senior vice-president at Marvel Entertainment, interviewed on the website ICv2 by Milton Gripp, stated that at a summit for comics retailers held by Marvel to combat falling sales “[w]hat we heard was that people didn’t want any more diversity. They didn’t want female characters out there. That’s what we heard, whether we believe that or not” (2017: n.p.). Although only two of the representatives actually remarked that comics with non-white or female leads did not sell well (the majority noted that those titles were bringing in new readers) the anti-diversity sentiment was picked up and greatly amplified on social media.

The original comments were of direct relevance to Wilson, who initially intended not to respond, but noting that some blogs used images from *Ms. Marvel* to illustrate posts about the purported unprofitability of diverse comics, argued in her own blog that

[i]f you’re going to write a smug think-piece about the ‘failure’ of ‘diversity’ in comics, maybe don’t use the cover image of a book that’s had 4 collections on the

NYT graphic books bestseller list, won a Hugo and cleaned up at Angouleme” (n.d.: n.p.)

She also commented that comics focusing on “authenticity and realism” were important to draw untapped audiences, which she loosely defined as younger people of all backgrounds and especially girls and young women.

Marvel’s attempts to create more diverse characters was also attacked in 2017, when some female staff were described, as reported by Asher Elbein, as “‘fake geek girls,’ ‘social justice warriors,’ and ‘tumblr-virtue signalers,’ the sort of people who were ruining the comics industry by their very presence” (2018: n.p.). Elbein compared this on-line anti-diversity harassment campaign, Comicsgate, to similar campaigns, especially Gamergate. Elbein stated that the medium offers a range of voices and representations, arguing that, “the small press and webcomics scene is a hotbed of experimentation and diverse, bold storytelling voices, in genres from romance to action adventure, much of it without a cape in sight” (n.p.). This comment downplays the superhero genre by reference to the absent cape, implying that Comicsgate is about white cisgender males seeing diversity as an attack on the hegemonic masculinity embedded, as they see it, in comics generally, and particularly the superhero genre. Elbein’s comments, in contrast, suggest that there is increasing gender and sexual diversity in all genres of comic for young people. I would argue, then, that representations of girls and girlhoods in comics serve to disrupt dominant discourses of male ownership of the medium. Further, that these comics do have substantial girl audiences means that one pleasure in reading these titles as a girl lies in subverting traditional notions that readers of comics are male.

Ms. Marvel is intended to challenge norms and notions of male ownership primarily through the titular character, Kamala Khan, a Muslim and Pakistani-American girl. The comic also draws on the life experiences of the creative and editorial team, giving it an authenticity in presenting a central character who can be seen as othered in ways explicitly linked with the world beyond the comic, as Fawaz (2016) argues is the case with other Marvel titles. That she is the star of the comic is significant, for as Miriam Kent argues, the comic’s “achievements in bringing a female Muslim Pakistani-American subjectivity into the limelight should not be underestimated” (2015: 525). However, she is not the only female character. Her female-dominated friendship group, an aspect of the comic that aligns it with queer girlhood spaces and non-normative communities, is also the focus of some narratives, and, since this is a series, it allows for the depiction of shifts in the views, attitudes, and assumptions of characters over time. In addition,

Ms. Marvel contains a real world location, New Jersey, (although a version refracted through a superhero comic lens) and narratives directly concerned with privilege, oppression, and intersectionality in an urban environment; like *Lumberjanes*, as I will go on to show, it shares an emotional realism concerning identity, love, and friendship.

Here, however, my focus is largely on the character, Zoe Zimmer, who begins the series as an intolerant bully. Initially, the creators follow the trope of girls as enemies through the introduction of Zoe as a white heterosexual mean girl who is top of the social hierarchy in the school Kamala and her best friend, Nakia, attend. As the narratives unfold, Zoe's experiences lead her to a gradual recognition that she wants to become friends with girls, and eventually realizes her attraction to them; the creators effectively subvert the trope.

Zoe's journey is secondary to that of the heterosexual central character, Kamala. However, given that Kamala makes white girlhood secondary through negotiating heterosexuality through her Muslim and Pakistani subjectivity, too, and irrespective of Zoe's sexual orientation, the comic takes a step away from dominant discourses. The comic queers girlhood primarily through ethnicity and activism rather than sexuality and sexual orientation. It also does so through the representation of diverse girlhoods, whether Muslim or otherwise. For example, Nakia, who is also Muslim, but from a Turkish background, is depicted as wearing a hijab, unlike Kamala, and so the title disrupts the persistent xenophobic trope of Muslim girlhoods as being homogenous, something which other Muslim characters extend further.

Zoe is presented initially in the images and through the dialogue as lacking any awareness of her privilege or her racism. In the first panel in which she appears, for instance, she enters a shop, arms opened wide, immediately dominating the space as if it is her right. The reader is positioned as looking at her, and, like the main characters who have already been introduced, sharing their point of view, thus locating Zoe as a character to be analyzed and critiqued, rather than admired. It is also apparent that the space immediately around Zoe is empty, emphasizing her distance from the others even as she talks to, or, rather, at them. In the following panels she is separated from the group by speech balloons that form a barrier in the panels or depicted in frenetic action in contrast to their stillness. Her depiction here acts potentially as consciousness-raising for some readers through emphasizing the links between the communities inside and outside of the comic and in its impetus towards possible self-recognition by some readers.

Zoe is described by Kamala's friend, Bruno, as a "concern troll" (Wilson and Alphona 2014: 1) as demonstrated in her comments regarding Nakia's

wearing a hijab. She says, “But I mean ... nobody pressured you to start wearing it, right? Nobody’s going to honor kill you? I’m just concerned,” thus positioning Nakia as both different and oppressed. When Nakia responds by stating that her father thinks this is a just a phase, Zoe’s response is, “Wow, cultures are so interesting” (3–4), showing her failure to recognize that she, too, belongs to a culture. In addition, Zoe’s constant reiteration of Kamala’s supposed difference leads Kamala to question her identity and heritage, thus demonstrating the internalization of the racism that surrounds her. However, upon becoming Ms. Marvel, Kamala’s first act is to save Zoe from drowning at a party while drunk, an experience that triggers Zoe’s reflection on her identity and values.

The thrust of the first volume is to introduce the key characters and the themes of intersectionality and activism. This world-building is typical of first volumes of superhero comics, but is, as Fawaz suggests, also significant because of “its dual reference to the aesthetic production of imaginative worlds and political practices that join creative production with social transformation” (2016: 14). Indeed, Wilson, as one of the authors, has said that she intends the text to reflect the real world through building a fictional one where the things that matter to these non-homogenous characters are the things that matter to actual young people.

Zoe becomes a significant character again in the fourth volume. Having acted as the racist foil earlier, she is forced to confront her previous behavior and reassess it in the face of an apocalyptic event. Consequently, she begins to engage with Kamala and with others in her community. For example, as everyone gathers in the school, she distributes drinks and blankets, saying to Kamala, “I feel like I need to contribute something. Like if this really is the zombie apocalypse, we’re all gonna need each other. The useless people always get eaten first” (Wilson and Alphonso 2015: 73). While this smacks of self-interest, what Zoe next says is much more self-reflective: she apologizes to Kamala, saying that she was jealous of her popularity and that she, Zoe, used racism as a weapon. In the panels in which this dialogue appears, Zoe and Kamala are given, largely, balanced visual weighting; this suggests that a more equal relationship is emerging. The composition also places neither as central to the image so one might, at this point in the series, choose to consider Zoe’s character becoming increasingly woke given her growing awareness regarding social and racial justice.²

In addition, Zoe’s subsequent comments about being hated by her peers act as a critique of white heterosexual cisgender mainstream American youth. She says, “Guys hate me because I won’t date them, and girls hate me because

there's this strange idea that we should spend all our time competing for guys" (74–75). This comment is in some ways ironic given that her previous behavior as a racist concern troll means that the other girls should, perhaps, choose to hate her, a point she acknowledges when confessing her jealousy. However, it also serves to indicate Zoe's increasing resistance to normative girlhoods, anticipating her later emergence as a queer girl. Later in this story she is depicted dancing alongside Nakia and behind Kamala, thus symbolizing her changing emotions and engagement with other people as she learns the steps to a dance they already know.

Later the series shows Zoe starting to take part in activism, predominantly in connection with local politics. Her blond hair is now multi-colored, and she becomes integrated into a multi-ethnic social group in place of that constituted by the all-white leaders of the school hierarchy. Her political engagement is particularly flagged up in volume five when Hydra begin building a new housing development in the area. However, this is a cover for ethnic and class cleansing and Nakia and Zoe both agitate against the development, their dialogue making it clear that they understand its potentially destructive consequences on what has been depicted throughout the series as a thriving diverse community.

It is in volume seven, in a story about a computer virus that learns about human interaction from players in a massively multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG), that Zoe's narrative and character development become explicitly about her identity as a queer girl.³ The virus manages to move onto social media, where it applies what it has learned about bullying and aggression from the behavior of gamers, basically becoming a troll. Eventually the virus demands to be smuggled into S.H.I.E.L.D.⁴ by Ms. Marvel. The virus threatens to share Zoe's love letters to Nakia, messages she has never sent, with the whole school if this task is not completed.

Kamala cannot go through with letting the virus infiltrate S.H.I.E.L.D., and visits Zoe in a scene that takes place over three and a half pages, a length that emphasizes its significance. While, as in the example from volume four mentioned above, the two characters are typically given equal space in each panel, one features Zoe in a close-up when she speaks of her probable rejection by Nakia. A similar image appears at the end of the discussion, as Zoe calls Nakia. These key panels have a plain, pale blue empty background, a space that serves to isolate Zoe, although the discussion takes place in her very pink, busy, and flowery bedroom. It could be argued that the style of the bedroom juxtaposed against both the piles of black clothes that lie all over the floor, and the dialogue, encapsulate how Zoe has changed.

The discussion between Zoe and Nakia, in contrast, is set in a park, although it also uses a contrasting background color, yellow in this case, to emphasize key statements. Although, as Zoe feared, Nakia is not attracted to her as a partner, she does wish to maintain the friendship that they have developed and is proud of Zoe for addressing her prejudices. At one moment they hug, and whereas all the other images are contained within the panels, this hug breaks the frame, adding extra importance to what is being depicted.

The virus narrative is about the tensions between social media and privacy for young people, and whether a private self is even possible, focusing particularly on the experience of girls considered other. This is indicated, in part, by the way that friendship groups and thoughtfulness are positioned in the narrative as hugely significant in countering the emotional damage done by experiencing prejudice, whether over social media or directly. This can be seen when the friends talk about their lives in ways that demonstrate intersectionality. For example, Mike talks about how wider culture blames it on her “two moms” when anything in her life goes wrong, while Nakia says, “It’s like being an immigrant kid ... you have to be the best, ’cause if you’re not its proof that your parents and their culture messed you up” (Wilson et al. 2017: 49). In most of these panels Zoe is visible, but rarely has any dialogue, whereas earlier she would have imposed her story on everyone present. This suggests two kinds of growth as part of a non-normative community—that of respecting others, and her own growth as a queer girl. She is positioned on the edges of panels in which she appears, so is visually secondary, too. It could also be said that these moments may be pedagogical for white cisgendered straight audiences and that Zoe is the stand-in for what might be a dominant readership.

Zoe, then, starts out as a minor character in the comic but becomes more significant and visible as the series continues. She becomes part of a wider female friendship group and increases the cohesion of the group through her actions, showing that diverse and mutually supportive girls can question and disrupt problematic norms.

Lumberjanes, in contrast, takes a different approach, creating an ideal utopian world and community that is supportive, non-normative, and queer, rather than engaging with a pre-existing location. This harmonious world for girls and women may well be informed by the publishers Boom! Box considering themselves to be a queer company. As Watters says,

We’re approaching creators and doing the comics that we like, as queer women. ... Generally, they feature lady protagonists kicking ass in a variety of positive ways. ... It’s hopeful to write stories that exist in that space, because it

gives you strength. I think it's very valuable and very important (quoted in Ching 2017: n.p.).

The narrative centers on a summer camp where a group of five girls meet and become friends. While such camps are typically depicted as places of conformity to social norms, this one undermines such tropes, and those about girls as competitors and enemies, offering a positive queer space, as the creators suggest in an interview with Shelley Diaz.

Allen: Growing up, there weren't many franchises or shows depicting a group of girls whose relationships weren't strained by popularity or a boy.

Watters: I'm a 'Baby-Sitter's Club' scholar and advocate. It was such an incredible behemoth. You can talk to any woman of a certain age about it, and BSC was so important and influential to her. But it's totally written off because it's about and written for girls. (Diaz 2015: n.p.)

In line with this influential approach, the supposedly traditional gender-defined organization and activity in the comic is continually undermined in the narratives and extra-textual elements of the books. For example, the stories are framed within what purports to be a *Lumberjanes Field Manual*. The addition of crossings-out and amendments indicate the nature of the camp, something that the narratives further cement. The first revision the reader sees changes the description of the camp by scribbling out a word and adding the handwritten term "hardcore lady-types" instead, thus offering an inclusive space and disrupting fixed designations. This also serves to suggest that making changes in the traditional text (or girlhood) is something that any reader of the series can do. The stories themselves present what might be seen as an empowering utopian space for queer girlhoods, and the comic acts as a diverse and inclusive microcosm regarding ethnicity, orientation, and other factors.

The narratives are based around finding solutions to problems, largely through building relationships across what might be seen as differences in age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. The central group consistently demonstrates the power of team-work and friendship and incorporates in their solutions other Lumberjanes, the Scouting Lads whose camp is based on the other side of the lake, and the older staff and volunteers at the camp. I would argue that the Lumberjanes are positioned as young contemporary feminists, personifying those who, as Nicola Rivers (2017) argues, focus on intergenerational and intersectional cooperation. This inclusivity takes in the non-human, too, as shown in volume five, when the Lumberjanes engage with a group of mermaids; about these creatures, as one of them says, "we PREFER [to be called] merwomyn" (Stevenson et al. 2016: 32). This incor-

poration of naming practices, then, flags up diversity, as does the fact that exclamations are not swear words, but the names of significant women from science or art, as, for instance, in the question that serves as my epigraph, “What in the Joan Jett are you doing?!” (3).

Those who oppose this coalition of kindness are selfish, greedy, keen on having power over others, and intolerant. Here the comic reflects the ideas in *Ms Marvel* in offering an image to readers of what a largely female community looks like when its members have shared values, care for each other, and put each other first, and what its antithesis looks like. Of course, this could also be read as being in line with the traditional female social training that privileges these qualities over independence and competition. However, Lumberjane April exhibits a combination of shared values and caring on the one hand, and a fierce competitiveness on the other, as shown in her desire to acquire a huge number of badges, along with a concern with beauty that can also be put to practical and combative use, for instance in her use of a scrunchy to drive off a sea monster.

The antithesis of the solidarity of the Lumberjanes is personified in volume four by Abigail, a hunter and embittered ex-Lumberjane who pursues the various intelligent, supernatural, and telepathic animals that exist in the area around the camp, seeing them as trophies rather than part of the ecosystem or beings in their own right. In the narrative, her ambition to kill an animal deity is shown as potentially disastrous and the Lumberjanes have to fight her to ensure its survival. This narrative suggests that the queer girl is, or can be, an eco-activist connecting with nature, and, while it can be seen as linked to traditional constructions of girlhood, this connection is not sentimentalized here. In addition, the queer girl in the series is also linked with the idea of the girl as scientist and with STEM subjects. For instance, Ripley, the youngest Lumberjane, is enthusiastic, like her grandmother, about natural history, natural phenomena, and climate.

Boyhood, while largely secondary, is included. For example, as part of the first story arc in volumes one and two, the Scouting Lads are mind-controlled by a selfish and greedy god as part of a battle with their sibling. This turns the Scouting Lads from the tidy, kitten-loving, cake-making group that they usually are into aggressive and destructive beings—representations of toxic masculinity. They are freed only when the youngest of the Lumberjanes, Ripley, steals the power of the gods, ensuring that neither sibling can have it. As this narrative suggests, the Scouting Lads favor the domestic, in contrast to the analytical and scientific orientation of the Lumberjanes, neatly flipping this gendered binary. The narrative also depicts girls rescuing

boys, rather than being victims in need of rescue, again subverting and complicating the image of the normative girl. These narratives and characterizations reflect Stevenson's assertion, that "[w]e wanted to provide stories with girls that people can look up to and boys that are sweet and caring" (quoted in Diaz 2015: n.p.).

In addition, it becomes apparent across the series that two of the Lumberjanes, Molly and Mal, have a growing love for each other. As Watters said, "[W]e want show kids that gay people exist, that they have stories too, and they're not bad or going to die at the end of the story as a result of being gay" (quoted in Diaz 2015: n.p.). Consequently, while this is the only romance in the series, it is not commented on. Instead, it is presented as an aspect of the close-knit group of which they are part, thus destabilizing the notion of queer girlhood as marginalized and isolated. Their relationship is focused on in volume three when Molly's lack of confidence leads her to wonder how Mal can even like her but ends with her realization that she needs to accept the affection and not doubt herself, given that they support each other and appreciate each other's skills. In effect, it is a model relationship presented through queer girls, both of whom are persons in their own right.

In each chapter in volume three, Molly and Mal are depicted together in panels, often touching or close to each other. One example shows them sitting by a fire telling scary stories in a panel that dominates the bottom third of the page, and in a long sequence in the following chapter they separate from the others and have a picnic together. This comic does not use thought balloons, so their growing affection is shown through body language and their physical closeness. It is only at the end of the volume that they almost speak of love, in a pair of panels, the second of which moves into a close-up of their faces as they lean together, but this moment is disrupted by the appearance of a bear.

Molly and Mal's narrative continues throughout the series, and in volume six, they embrace and kiss at being reunited. This moment is followed by four panels depicting the surprised and pleased reactions of their friends. The community recognition of their partnership reinforces their confidence and the narrative ends with them walking hand in hand, their hands central to the image.

While there is ostensibly a fixed designation in the titles and participants of each summer camp, Lumberjanes and Scouting Lads, this is slowly revealed as less fixed through Lumberjane Jo, one of the central characters. As the series progresses, it becomes apparent that Jo is transgender. This is

rarely noted since the comics largely dispense with fixed labels but is important to one story in volume four in which Jo becomes jealous of Scouting Lad Barney's increasing intimacy with her closest friend, April, and so she attempts to ignore and exclude him. Later, however, Jo and Barney have to work together, which unites them in a common cause and leads to Jo's sharing how Barney's involvement with the Lumberjanes has made her feel, apologizing by saying,

Nah, I'm sorry. I was being a jerk. I think ... you remind me too much of a younger me. A version of me I didn't like. The me I would've been if I'd had to become a Scouting Lad.

Barney's response is both an acknowledgement and a recognition when he asks, "Do you ever feel like you belong somewhere else? Like everyone around you looks at you and THINKS they know who you are and what you want, but it's actually totally different?" Jo says,

I felt that way for a while. The Lumberjane Scouts were the first place I ever felt like I could be who I actually was. I know exactly where I belong. And it was never across the lake with the Scouting Lads. Maybe it's the same for you? (Stevenson et al. 2016: 98).

This exchange suggests to the reader how it might feel to recognize oneself as transgender, and that discussion with others helps one to self-awareness. Again, too, the narrative emphasizes that having a shared course of action and shared principles and goals helps to create group cohesion.

Barney's is a sub-narrative, deliberately destabilizing the centrality of male experience. However, in intersecting with Jo's story, it makes a clear point about belonging and identity in insisting that one's assigned sex at birth is not relevant. This is another aspect of the series that reflects contemporary issues around LGBTQ+ people. To conclude, *Lumberjanes* offers playfulness and positivity located in a liminal and utopian space in an idealized queer community.

Conclusion

Both these titles depict individuals rejecting a socially constructed fixed state and explore the impact this may have on social relationships, but also critique internalized cultural values regarding heteronormative girlhood. These comics focus on queer girls in a number of different ways. *Lumberjanes* presents a utopian queer community, although it could be read as suggesting

that such a space can be made only in a liminal setting. Nonetheless, in terms of behaviors it suggests a model for cooperation and mutual support that dismisses heteronormativity. In comparison, *Ms. Marvel* does not make the queer girl the focus of the entire series but does disrupt normative girlhood in making Muslim girlhoods central. In addition, it shows that one can move away from fixed labels and norms through Zoe, who is then positioned, as a queer girl, within an intersectionally focused friendship group. This can be seen as a text that allows a wide range of readers to see themselves in the narrative, and also as one that continually flags up issues of privilege, politics, and activism.

Both engage with the emotions, and the emotional roots of belonging to the self and to the community. Diverse, rather than monolithic, girls' cultures are key and these texts critique norms, or create worlds not dominated by heteronormative girlhood. These graphic novels are emphatically not about queer girls as representative of a problem to be solved, or queerness as a phase to grow out of, but offer reflections, celebrations, utopias, and intellectual toolkits to create change. In different ways, they subvert and complicate the normative girl and reveal a shift in comics as an industry increasingly involving diverse creator voices and addressing diverse audiences.



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Notes

1. G. Willow Wilson stepped down during 2019.
2. Wilson based Zoe on herself.
3. Players take on a character, typically, in a science fiction or fantasy setting. When a player is offline this fictional world continues to exist and evolve based on the actions of the other characters and of the publisher.
4. This organization is an espionage, special law enforcement, and counter-terrorism agency that first appeared in Marvel comics in 1965 and continues to appear regularly.

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